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THE ORIGIN OF LAUGHTER¹

By SYLVIA H. BLISS

"The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation." *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* Henri Bergson.

There is noticeable in various quarters a revival of interest in the subject of laughter. Thinkers are resolutely attacking this problem—which Bergson may term little, but which in reality is very large. Our knowledge of the exciting causes of this most human act has been greatly extended, yet the subject is by no means exhausted. Despite the clever and penetrating theories advanced the essential secret of laughter remains shrouded in mystery.

Is it not possible that an attack from a different quarter may prove less barren of results? The question may not be for the philosopher after all but instead demand evidence from the biologist and the psychologist. If, through all the centuries, the challenge has been flung at the feet of the wrong party, Bergson may well characterize it as "pert." The problem is not primarily in regard to the nature of the thing laughed at; neither has it to do in the first instance with the reason for laughter at that particular thing. In the act itself is the mystery. Why should we laugh at all?

Those who have investigated the matter have too often paused in their search when a perception of one aspect of the comic has been attained. Thenceforth their endeavors are directed to the task of elucidating and illustrating this one aspect with the result that the original, underlying cause of laughter remains almost untouched. The earnest student turns from current theories in disappointment. They do not go deep enough. Dr. Sidis' recent book, with its wealth of illustration—which his theory, "Allusion to human stupidity is the root of all comic," is strained to explain, leaves the

¹ The writer has learned that the argument in this article is similar in some respects to that used by Freud in his treatise on wit. Her investigation was independent of that of the latter.

reader far from satisfied, while Bergson's clever exposition of the comic is based upon the laughter of highly developed, modern man. From the essay of the latter floats the laughter of the cultured Frenchman—late product of the world's most highly civilized race. For an adequate investigation the consideration of quite other and simpler phenomena is necessary.

The apparent causes of laughter are so various that the generalization which embraces all its manifestations must be wide indeed and likewise very simple. We are forced to reckon not only with the broad and generally recognized field of the humorous and with the stock instances of the comic; with deformity, eccentricity, surprise, queerness, "the mechanical in the living," and the inferior, but also with numerous occasions not readily classifiable which yet can by no means be ignored. The laughter of childhood; the laughter with which, according to a press dispatch, two women in the Italian quarter in New York watched the death struggles of a man whom their companion had murdered; the laughter, as noted by the dramatic critic of *The Westminster Gazette*, invariably won from an audience by the utterance on the stage of the word "damn"—these are a few of the instances awaiting accurate classification.

The evidence afforded by the smile must also be admitted. This fleeting "pale vestige of a laugh," arising at a multitude of provocations, supersedes to a great extent in the highly cultivated person, the more vigorous physical reaction.

Science has demolished the idea of a "funny bone," finds in the brain no special center for appreciation of the humorous, and in the world of thought and action nothing inherently, intrinsically comic. A social corrective, an outlet for surplus energy, relief from strain—laughter is all these assuredly, yet to perceive certain ends which a function serves is by no means to account for its existence. It is evident that the laughter of the modern human being is a highly complex function far removed from the bald simplicity of that first laugh whose strange sound broke the long, silent gravity of the pre-human ages. What emotion gave rise to the first laugh? Was that primeval man in any modern sense amused? He laughed at no sally of wit; his brain was tickled by no subtle and devious perception of the comic. Of this we may be certain. Summoning to our aid the evidence which biology and psychology afford and guided by the imagination exalted by scientific training to a species of insight, we will penetrate to that far away epoch, when mirth was born to earth.

What was the first emotion, and what its cause? Without

doubt the organisms lowest in the scale of life were and are emotionless. Fulfilling without hindrance or delay their functions of nutrition and reproduction, with need and opportunity for satisfaction, income and expenditure, nicely balanced, what room for pleasurable or painful feeling? Scarcely with accuracy may we use the term satisfaction in connection with forms so simple, for satisfaction implies a period of want, and here such hiatus between desire and fulfillment, if existent, is infinitesimal. With advance in the scale of life this simple equilibrium is disturbed. Instinct is delayed in its functioning, hunger and reproduction must wait on occasion. Thus began the swing of the pendulum between need and satisfaction, and without doubt all the marvelous complexity of human emotion is due in the last analysis to the lengthened repetition, the slower and more devious recurrence, of that primal oscillation. With further advance need grew more poignant, satisfaction more intense, until in the higher animals we meet states of feeling fitly termed sad and joyful.

Why not laughter? Why is man alone, of all creation, the animal that laughs? Readily enough comes the answer: Because man alone has intelligence to perceive the humorous. But we find that intelligence is not coextensive with laughter nor is appreciation of the comic a necessary condition of its arousal. Yet it is possible that a consideration of certain other differences between men and animals—differences usually overlooked—will yield matter of greater significance to our problem.

The animal is perfectly natural. It follows instinct, hiding and repressing nothing. It may growl, roar, fight, give chase, plunder, excrete, and, subject to certain limitations, feed and reproduce, when it wills. Indecency and shame are words without meaning. Rightness exhorts no homage. If he loves, well and good, but if he hates no social or ethical code torments him with its "ought." In scientific phraseology there is for the animal no inhibition of instinct. With this free and natural state contrast man's condition. In the evolution of humanity those instincts which are inimical to the progress of civilization are theoretically transformed into qualities and acts less at variance with social and ethical laws, but in reality the substitution is far from perfect and entire. Man is not yet completely evolved; he is but partly adjusted to a civilized environment and a portion of his nature lags far behind at a primitive, savage level.

The human being, from childhood up, must curb, repress, skulk, hide, control. From the mother's "no, no," to the

thundering "Thou shalt not" from Mount Sinai there is a constant denial of instinct. So accustomed are we to regard this as pure benefit that we are blind to the accompanying disservice.

Consider man's inner life—a nest of hopes, impulses, and desires, in themselves perfectly natural and to be expected at this stage of evolution, yet directly in opposition to the prevailing social, ethical and religious codes. Nature confined is not entirely quiescent. With all the outlets, transformations and substitutions which physical and mental activities afford there remains still a large residue of repressed primal instinct which results in discordant and tense conditions in the subconscious life. The repressions of the primitive man of our study were obviously of the most elemental impulses and took place in obedience to nascent social demands of the tribe and through his own growing sense of shame.

Regarding emotion in its essence as the state of tension occasioned by delay between impulse and act, desire and fulfillment, hunger and satisfaction, and perceiving that the primary emotional difference between animals and men consists in the fact that the latter, of their own volition, to serve certain ends, carry on the work of restraint and delay initiated by nature, eventually pushing into the subconscious region tendencies at variance with the slowly forming social code, we discern the conditions ripe for the origin of laughter. For laughter is the result of suddenly released repression, the physical sign of subconscious satisfaction. Our primitive man saw, it may be, another do the thing reprobated by the tribe and his own nascent conscience. The sight relieved the tension occasioned by his own repressed wish to do the selfsame thing—and he laughed. That paroxysm of nerve and muscle was not caused by sense of superiority, as Dr. Sidis would no doubt claim; rather it sprang from unconscious sympathy with the reactionary act.

It is probable that the track for that particular discharge of nervous energy was laid long before actual laughter took place. Darwin noted that the lower jaw of some species of baboons quivered up and down when they were much pleased. The writer has seen the jaws of cats quiver when the animals were excited by the near approach of prey. Expectancy, pleasurable anticipation, satisfaction, with their accompanying bodily reactions, paved the way for laughter.

Today in the highly civilized human being what part of the personality laughs? The highest and latest evolved? The keen trained intellect perceiving something which delights it?

Do wisdom, learning, dignity, purity, laugh? Recall Meredith's opinion as voiced by Adrian Hartley: "Mournful you call it? Well, all wisdom is mournful. 'Tis therefore that the wise do love the Comic Muse. Their own high food would kill them. You should find great poets, rare philosophers, night after night on the broad grin before a row of yellow lights and mouthing masks. Why? Because all's dark at home." From what region does that broad grin come? From idealism, philosophy and wisdom satisfied by nonsense, pleased at folly? Or does the laugh spring from that in the man which is akin to what is portrayed?

We are but half in sympathy with that which we profess. We are not in all respects what we think we are. Under certain conditions there is release of our unrecognized tendencies. De Quincey said that a man is disguised by sobriety rather than by intoxication; and as intoxication uncovers the under-self in man, so laughter, in the temperate, discloses, more delicately and deviously, the mind's unconscious tendencies. Grave, dignified, humane, respectable, religious—why do we laugh at the clever portrayal of characters quite the opposite? Is it not because a part of our personality is in sympathy with the indecorum, triviality, vulgarity of what we see? Are we not as honest at the vaudeville as at church—if we attend both? Even more honest? There may be hypocrites at church; never at the theater. We may bow the head during public prayer because it is the custom; we laugh at a joke because we must.

This view finds confirmation when we consider what occurs during a struggle to suppress laughter—at the indecorum of a child or at a joke "delicately not decent." Our surface sense of propriety strives to suppress the evidence of subconscious approval. Without doubt the blush is the result of similar though still deeper, conflicts.

A clever comedienne responding in a recent interview to the query, How is one funny? said, "I believe that the thing that really takes is the thing with a touch of nature in it." Her remark was more profound than she knew. The secret of laughter is in a return to nature. Civilization and culture are late additions and we are living to a great extent in artificial conditions. Even common sense, according to Bergson, is an effort. Psychology makes plain the fact that our present mental equipment has been slowly and painfully acquired and a certain strain in maintaining that high altitude is inevitable. This tension is relieved by nonsense and by the portrayal in humorous anecdotes and on the stage of evasions of con-

vention and infractions of the prevailing code of manners and of morals. Carlyle once declared that Shakespeare was greater than Jesus and pointed to the creation of Falstaff as proof of his assertion. Of Christ he said: "There is no Falstaff in Him." For the individual who is not shocked by this remark it is a perennial source of humorous feeling. I defy a broad and healthy-minded man, even one of fine religious temper, to read it without smiling. Casting about for a reason what do we find? Contrast, the inferiority of Falstaff, the fact that he is a stock character, typical of certain vices? Various formulas of the comic fit the case, but do not, I venture to say, explain the peculiarly humorous character of Carlyle's statement. Falstaff stands as a representative of the primitive, natural man, and brought into juxtaposition with his most startling and exalted antithesis in character, elevated for once in human judgment above that which has stifled and repressed the traits he represents, he triumphs for the moment, and through him nature in ourselves justifies its existence—and laughs.

I am not aware that any explanation has been given of the smile of the subject entering the hypnotic state. As this is a usual accompaniment of the condition it presents an interesting problem. If the theory advanced in this essay approaches the truth the solution of the problem is made plain by Professor Jastrow's description of the hypnotic consciousness: "— a release from the restraining influences of fear, hesitation, and the ideals of reason and propriety." Here again a simpler, more primitive self has its opportunity—and smiles.

Having stated, somewhat clearly and convincingly, it is hoped, the theory of laughter as the expression of subconscious satisfaction, it remains to test the theory by application to various occasions of laughter. Before proceeding, however, a glance at Bergson's essay on the subject will be instructive. As I advanced in my study from point to point, the main thesis becoming at each step ever clearer and more reasonable, I was struck by the confirmation afforded it by certain isolated passages in the work of the French philosopher—passages which he interprets in accordance with his definition of the comic as the "mechanical in the living." "What is essentially laughable is what is done automatically. In a vice, even in a virtue, the comic is that element by which the person unwittingly betrays himself—the involuntary gesture or the unconscious remark." "Profoundly comic sayings are those artless ones in which some vice reveals itself

in all its nakedness." "Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is concerned." "The comic character slackens in the attention that is due to life." "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing."

Why should we laugh at automatism, the mechanical, absent-mindedness? Bergson's explanation is that these things stand for unsociability, for imperfection, which call for the corrective of laughter. But we do not laugh in order to correct the comic. Laughter is spontaneous and involuntary. It bursts forth when a person unwittingly betrays himself because that betrayal is of natural, elemental tendencies. Laughter is honest and responds to the primitive honesty of others. We laugh at a sneeze which hinders a speech at its most pathetic passage because pathos in oratory is always somewhat strained—even artificial, while the sneeze is absolutely natural and honest. We laugh at the sudden intrusion of the physical when the moral, spiritual, or intellectual is predominant because the latter are of late date in man's evolution—from the body's standpoint interlopers in the household of personality, and the abrupt resumption of rule by the physical delights because there is relief, triumph, even, fancifully speaking, a species of revenge. What has not the body suffered through dominance of the soul!

Passing to the consideration of some of the conditions which give rise to laughter it must be admitted at the outset that not all upon analysis yield to the interpretation advanced in this essay. But let it be remembered that our theory endeavors to account for pure, elemental laughter. Once organized, once this particular emotional reaction—possibly accidental in the first instance—became a habit of the nervous system, occasions for its use multiplied. The act was of value to developing humanity. It has eased—it is easing—the transition from the freedom and naturalness of animal and savage life to freedom *from* the animal and savage, our long and difficult task.

All theories of laughter and the comic are more or less applicable for the laughter of the world today flashes and gleams like the rays of light from a many-faceted jewel. Still do we find it in large measure the symbol of subconscious satisfaction but it has become expressive also of various other satisfactions, complex, subtle and devious. Certain of these are direct outgrowths of the more primitive forms and traceable to the same roots, while others are apparently purely mental in character. It is notable that the higher we rise in

the scale of wit and humor the less hearty and boisterous is the accompanying laughter. It has been said that it is with their minds that Americans laugh most, nowadays. Interpreted from the standpoint of our study this indicates an advance in evolution—the substitution of mental for more primitive needs and tendencies.

Obviously our formula covers all instances of the humorous which relate to socially and morally reprobated acts and conditions. It is in this region that the greatest repressions occur and these in turn give rise to our broadest and coarsest humor. The theory likewise accounts for laughter at remarks having double meaning and at jokes whose point depends upon their vague hint or suggestion of evil. These may win a smile from persons who would turn in disgust from obvious vulgarity and obscenity. Only a keen and delicate shaft can penetrate their surface conventionality and refinement. But a step removed is the laughter which greets profanity on the stage. Without doubt the laugh springs from unconscious sympathy with the vigorous expletive. The theory easily fits also that large field of the comic which owes its power to the sudden humiliation and confounding of pride, pretension, formality, dignity, assumption of piety, learning or virtue, and the like. We are subconsciously on the side of the child or simple, unconventional individual who blurts out the plain, honest truth.

Beyond this lies a very wide region whose exploration exceeds the purpose of this essay, yet one or two ventures beyond the easy and obvious application of our theory will serve to show its unsuspected scope and adaptability. Take, for instance, the story cited by Bergson, and quoted by Dr. Sidis in his *Psychology of Laughter*. The anecdote relates to an M. P., who, when questioning the Home Secretary on the morrow of a terrible murder which took place in a railway carriage, remarks: "The assassin, after despatching his victim, must have got out the wrong side of the train, thereby infringing the Company's rules." Bergson explains the laughable effect of this remark by the implied automatic regulation of society, "an administrative regulation—setting itself up for a law of nature." Sidis dismisses it with the brief note—"There is nothing mechanical about it except the fact that the remark shows the stupidity of the M. P." But just where is the real crux of the story? Do we laugh at the implied automatism, or, on the other hand, at the assumed stupidity of the M. P.? Rather is not the smile caused by the sudden subordination of artificial, man-made rules by the

great, tragic, unconventional, and in a sense natural, act of murder? Shift the order in which the incidents are related, picture first the rigid regulations and then their sudden infraction by the escaping murderer, and we have tragedy, the direct predominance of the greater fact. But tune the imagination first to murder and then obtrude the petty rules as in any sense binding upon that wild, tragic,—even triumphant figure, and the wild, tragic and unconventional within ourselves exults in its superiority and priority,—and laughs.

Or, again, why do we laugh at the following anecdote related by Sidis? "An Irishman in a museum was looking at a copy of the Winged Victory, and asked an attendant what it was called, 'That is a statue of Victory, sir,' was the reply. Pat surveyed the headless and armless statue with renewed interest. 'Vichtry, is it?' he said. 'Then begorry, Oi'd loike to see the other fellow.'"

Undoubtedly Pat was ignorant—of art, yet it is not this fact in itself which renders the story so delightfully refreshing. Spencer's theory of the cause of laughter as a descending congruity—the transference of consciousness from great things to small—is in order here; also the explanations offered by contrast, surprise, superiority, and Bergson's idea that we are amused at the intrusion of the body when the soul is meant. Yet these theories merely remove the problem a step farther from us. Why do we laugh at descending congruity, contrast, the body when the soul is meant? In attempting to apply our own explanation let it be noted that the story amuses in proportion to our appreciation of the value of the statue—as a work of art and as a symbol of man's highest victories. Is it that portion of ourselves in sympathy with the highest meaning of the work which laughs? Or is it that submerged nook where lurks approval of Pat's point of view,—which delights in his vision of a vanquished physical antagonist, minus even more than head and arms? Doubtless we harbor an unconscious pugnacity revolting in obscurity against the dominance of unfleshy ideals and which, through the medium of the story, is for the moment triumphant.

Passing finally to another variety of the comic, why do we laugh at the story of the Irishman who declared that the moon was of greater use than the sun because it shone at night, when without it we should be in darkness? The secret spring of amusement does not lie in the fact that the speaker is ignorant, for, state the matter in another manner,—say, "There is a man who does not know that the light of day

comes from the sun and that the moon's radiance is but a reflection from the same source," and we smile but slightly. Evidently the mirth-provoking element is to be found in the manner of making the statement. We laugh at the first form because we perceive the fallacy of the statement instantaneously, without a conscious process of reasoning. We delight in mental agility, just as on a lower plane we delight in bodily agility which in turn is a substitute for still more primitive activities.

There remains to be explained the tendency to break forth into laughter on occasions of great gravity, solemnity, sorrow, and even tragedy. Constituted as we are it is evident that the entire personality can not long remain keyed to the highest pitch. There is always the possibility of dissociation, of the sudden breaking away of the natural man under the strain,—or perhaps more truly the severance of the tense, solemn mood, resulting in relief and satisfaction on a lower plane. The mirth of the two women witnesses of a murder, before mentioned, may be referred to subconscious cruelty, and this in turn—it is probable—to still deeper repressions and perversions.

Apparently the natural method would have been to investigate first the laughter of childhood, but if the view advanced in this essay approaches truth it was not the child who first laughed. Repression of impulses and conscious regulation of the life could begin only with the adult. In time the artificial standards would be imposed on the child and at length inhibition would become organized in the race—a habit of the nervous system. Laughter, beginning as an accidental physical convulsion following indirect or delayed satisfaction of repressed impulses, would likewise have become a habit of the body and it is not difficult to conjecture why in the child, that bundle of budding instincts and premature impulses laughter should follow the slightest stimulus. Later, as body and mind are increasingly exercised, furnishing an outlet for subconscious impulses, laughter becomes less.

In a recent interesting article H. Addington Bruce¹ describes the laughter of childhood and in consequence all laughter as "a means whereby nature provides a salutary outlet for surplus nervous energy." But it is doubtful if we can, with strict scientific accuracy, speak of nature as deliberately and directly implanting an instinct "for the performance of an important physiological function." Among the various responses of a developing organism to environment those prov-

¹ *The Outlook*, August 9, 1913.

ing useful would persist as habits and eventually become organized as instincts. The habit of laughter developed and survived because it was useful. The man who laughed heartily was among those fittest to survive. Furthermore, "surplus nervous energy" is but another name for unused power which could arise, in the first instance, only through the restraint and repression of natural functions. Thus it will be seen that the theory of laughter as a means for the outlet of nervous energy itself requires explanation, and this explanation is afforded, logically and satisfactorily it appears to the writer, by the doctrine of the satisfaction of subconscious tendencies.

It may be objected that the view of human nature involved in this theory of the origin of laughter is degrading. From the standpoint of the idealist the assumption of a special faculty of the mind whose function it is to recognize the presence of a definite humorous quality in events and acts would better accord with man's dignity and worth. But the evidence favors no such assumption. On the other hand, those who delve most deeply into the abyss of human mentality testify to the complexity, contradiction, and inequality of the elements of mind. The recognition of truth is in the end never degrading but prophylactic and remedial. Perceiving the function of laughter-provoking agencies we shall be slow to condemn even the broadest and coarsest humor, for this, furnishing an indirect outlet for suppressed instincts, may be more beneficent than we know. Lacking this relief the impulses might seek satisfaction in forms much less innocent. Laughter is born of the exigencies of evolving humanity and it will be long before its joyful echoes die from the earth.